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THE DEVELOPMENT OF BERKELEY'S ETHICAL THEORY.

THOUGH Berekeley wrote no systematic ethical treatise, it is clear from the *Commonplace Book* that he at one time intended to write in detail on morals. In the sanguine pages of the *Commonplace Book*, the "new principle" is destined to solve all problems and simplify all sciences. All previous thinkers had been "embrangled in words," and Berkeley regards it as his God-appointed task "to remove the mist and veil of words."[1] It was his hope that the exposition of the new principle would do this, and enable men to see things as they really are. Even in the *Principles* his claims for his new doctrine are as insistent as ever. His principles "abridge the labor of study and make human sciences more clear, compendious, and attainable than they were before."[2] After making this claim, he goes on to state some of the consequences in mathematics and natural philosophy. But as to the consequences in ethics only a few hints are given. "If the principle be applied to morals, errors of dangerous consequence to morality may be cleared, and truth appear plain, uniform, and consistent." "But," says Berkeley, "the difficulties arising on this head demand a more particular disquisition than suits with the design of this treatise."[3] It is a sign that Berkeley regarded this as tantamount to a promise to deal specially with ethics that in the second edition of the *Principles*, published in 1734, when he had abandoned the project of this special dissertation, this sentence is omitted. Again, in the *Commonplace Book* he remarks that there are three kinds of truth—natural, mathematical, and moral.[4] These three kinds of truth are to be found in the three departments of useful knowledge, natural philosophy, mathematics and ethics. He intended to treat of all these in detail, but in no case was that intention carried out, though we know from the closing sections of the *Principles* the general lines on which he would have handled the problems of mathematics and physics. And we have several tracts dealing with these sciences, *e. g.*, *Arithmetica*, *Miscellanea Mathematica*, *De Motu*, *The Analyst*, and *A Defence of Free Thinking in Mathematics*. It was Berkeley's purpose to deal with ethics in Part II of the *Principles*. He set to work on this undertaking after Part I (what we know as the *Principles*) was completed, but never finished it. The unfinished manuscript was lost during his travels in Italy and he never attempted to re-write it.[1]

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[1] *Commonplace Book*, I, p. 33. All references are to the Oxford edition (1901) of the *Works*.

[2] *Principles*, I, p. 334.

[3] *Ibid.*, I, p. 339.

[4] *Commonplace Book*, I, p. 37.

But though accident has deprived us of this specifically ethical treatise, yet scattered up and down Berkeley's work there is a fair amount of writing on ethical subjects. It is enough not merely to enable us to reconstruct the main outlines of Berkeley's system, but also to trace the development of his views. The *Commonplace Book* teems with suggestive remarks, which probably give some idea of the argument of the lost Part II of the *Principles*. In addition, three of the dialogues in *Alciphron* are mainly ethical, and there is much valuable matter in *Passive Obedience*.

Berkeley's jottings in the *Commonplace Book* show that in ethics, as in other departments of philosophy, he was deeply influenced by Locke. Such isolated entries as "Morality may be demonstrated as mixt Mathematics," cannot be understood without reference to Locke. Most of Berkeley's memoranda in the *Commonplace Book* have Locke in view; and in order to appreciate their meaning it is necessary to have in mind Locke's theory of ethics.

Ethics, for Locke, is a perfectly demonstrable science, because in ethics we have "real knowledge." He gives two examples of sciences in which we have this "real knowledge," (i) mathematics, (ii) ethics. Both these sciences consist of perfectly demonstrable propositions. Both are concerned, not with simple ideas, which always imply as their archetypes external things, but with complex ideas, which are their own archetypes. Both deal with those abstract ideas which Locke calls "mixed modes and relations." The mathematician considers the properties of the triangle as abstract ideas. The idea of a triangle is so framed as to make it possible that a 'real' concrete triangle should conform to it. But whether such a 'real' triangle exists is irrelevant to the mathematician. Similarly, in ethics we deal only with abstract ideas. Ethics is a purely abstract science. To the moral philosopher it is of no moment whether a concrete just act anywhere exists.[1] Mathematics and ethics are both demonstrated on the basis of certain definitions and axioms. Between moral ideas there are the same necessary relations as hold between mathematical ideas. "I doubt not but from self-evident propositions by necessary consequences as incontestable as those in mathematics the measures of right and wrong might be made out."[2]

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[1] In the *Commonplace Book* (I, p. 19) Berkeley speaks of "The two great principles of morality . . . to be handled at the beginning of the Second Book." There can be no doubt that "the Second Book" refers to the projected Part II of the *Principles*. In the *Commonplace Book* he frequently speaks of "the First Book" and comparison of the points mentioned with the *Principles* (Part I) shows that "the First Book" always means the *Principles* (Part I). In a letter to the American Samuel Johnson, Berkeley says that he had made considerable progress with the Second Part, but lost the manuscript during his journeys in Italy.

Locke never altogether abandoned his belief in a mathematically demonstrated science of ethics,[3] though he came to feel less and less able to demonstrate it himself. This is clear both from the changes which he introduced in the fourth edition of the *Essay*,[4] and from his correspondence with Molyneux. Molyneux repeatedly requested him "to oblige the world with a treatise of morals . . . according to the mathematical method." Locke replied (September 20, 1692) expressing distrust in his own ability for the task; but promising to consider it. Nearly four years later he finally declined to undertake it.

It is thus not strange that Berkeley, already keenly interested in mathematics, should have felt that the mathematical demonstration of ethics was a task ready-laid to his hand. Locke had given one hint of the precise way in which the mathematical method might be applied. For Locke, "Certainty is but the agreement or disagreement of our ideas, and demonstration nothing but the perception of such agreement by the intervention of other ideas or mediums."[1] Now in mathematics algebra had been of use in supplying these intermediate ideas, and Locke thinks that by applying a kind of algebra in ethics a demonstrably certain system will be produced. Berkeley was not slow to fasten on this hint. "N. B." he says in the *Commonplace Book*, "to consider well what Locke saith concerning Algebra—that it supplies intermediate ideas. Also to think of a method affording the same use in morals, etc., that this doth in mathematics."[2] Berkeley was keenly interested in algebra (cf. the many references in the *Commonplace Book*, and the article "De Ludo Algebraico" (1707) in *Miscellanea Mathematica*). Algebra is itself a department of pure mathematics, for algebra deals with signs abstracted from the things signified. But the algebra of ethics would be a branch of applied mathematics. Thus "Morality may be demonstrated as mixt Mathematics."[3]

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[1] Cf. *Essay*, III, p. 12 and IV, iv, p. 8.

[2] *Ibid.*, IV, iii, 18. Cf. III, xi, 16, and IV, xii, 8.

[3] The examples which Locke gives (IV, iii, 18) are justly said by Berkeley to be "trifling propositions." (*Commonplace Book*, I, p. 39).

[4] Compare the fourth edition with the first at IV, ii, 9.

Berkeley never worked out his algebra of ethics.[4] But he said enough to show that his system would have diverged widely from Locke's. The difference between their systems of ethics would have been identical with that between their theories of mathematics. For Locke, geometry is a pure science, dealing only with relations of universal ideas, abstracted from all concrete experience. On the other hand Berkeley holds that geometry is essentially practical. The *Principles* cut away the speculative parts of mathematics, leaving only what is practical and useful.[1] Geometry deals throughout with concrete existence. In a precisely similar way Berkeley's theory of ethics differs from Locke's. Ethics is for Locke a pure science which omits all question of the realization of abstract ideas in the concrete matter-of-fact of moral experience. But Berkeley's view is very different. Ethics is an applied or practical science. It does not consider relations of ideas by means of intervening ideas.[2] Berkeley holds that ethics is a demonstrative science which, like mathematics, deals with words or signs and not with ideas. We can have no certainty about ideas, as Locke supposed.[3] It is possible to reason about ideas, but demonstration can be only verbal.[4] "To demonstrate morality it seems one need only make a dictionary of words, and see which included which."[5] Words are signs and the reason why demonstration is possible and easy with regard to signs is that they are arbitrary. Hence the demonstrability of mathematics, which deals solely with signs.[6] Further, Berkeley believed that Locke's abstract ideas do not exist either in mathematics or in ethics. An abstract idea of triangle is impossible. Equally impossible is an abstract idea of justice. On Berkeley's theory, we reason always about a particular, which stands for all other particulars of the same kind.

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[1] *Essay*, IV, iv, 7.

[2] *Commonplace Book*, I, p. 40.

[3] *Ibid.*, I, p. 46.

[4] It is noteworthy that nearly every philosopher of the seventeenth century believed in a mathematical treatment of ethics. There is, of course, Spinoza's *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*. In the *Ethica* of Geulincx there are many suggestions of the applicability of mathematics to morals. And Leibniz also holds that it may be convenient to treat ethics by the geometrical method. (*Nouveaux Essais*, III, xi, 17 and IV, xii, 8). In England, as Professor Gibson has pointed out (*Mind*, 1896), Cumberland, in addition to Locke, held this view. It is also present in Hobbes. There are probably two main reasons for the prevalence of the view at the time:—(i) So long as Scholasticism held the field, the validity of ethical criteria rested ultimately on the authority of the Church. But with the coming of the Renaissance and the Reformation, the problem of the authority of the moral standard became a very real one. How was moral heterodoxy to be met? To this question there were two answers. Ethics must again become theological. Or ethics must become mathematical. These were the only alternatives. Therefore those who, for any reason, disliked the idea of a theological ethics, or considered it philosophically inadequate, were driven to attempt to demonstrate ethics mathematically. For the philosophers of the seventeenth century as a whole, science means nothing but mathematics and mathematical physics. When the seventeenth

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century attempts to treat ethics on the mathematical method, it is simply feeling after a scientific system of ethics. (ii) It was partly due to Descartes that mathematics came to be the science of the day, and Descartes' influence was largely responsible for the unanimity with which the seventeenth century endeavored to reach a mathematical system of ethics.

[1] *Principles*, I, p. 326; I, p. 331.

[2] *Commonplace Book*, I, p. 40; I, p. 43.

[3] *Ibid.*, I, p. 43.

[4] *Ibid.*, I, p. 50.

[5] *Ibid.*, I, p. 39. Cf. I, p. 37 and I, p. 55.

[6] *Ibid.*, I, pp. 45–47.

We take this or that just act, ignore all irrelevant features, and make it stand for and represent all other just acts.

The only difficulty in the way of such a system of ethics which Berkeley mentions is the practical difficulty of reaching agreement with regard to its definitions. The definitions which mathematics employs are not questioned, because the learner comes to them with no preconceived ideas. He is willing to take them on trust. But in ethics it is otherwise. Men approach the subject with presuppositions of their own. They cling to these primitive convictions, and refuse to come to any agreement in the definition of terms.

One very real difficulty which Locke had mentioned is denied by Berkeley. Locke had pointed out that the complexity of moral ideas increases the difficulty of dealing with them by the mathematical method. But Berkeley sees nothing in this.[1] Yet if 'complexity' be extended to include the relations and context of moral ideas, Locke's point becomes a very real one. On Berkeley's theory, if we take a particular triangle it is possible to abstract what is irrelevant to its triangularity, and the particular may be taken to stand for all particulars of the same kind. And, as we have seen, Berkeley thinks the same thing may be done in ethics. But it is not thus possible to isolate a just act. If it be cut loose from its context, it may be no longer a just act. Its justice may consist precisely in the complex relations in which it stands to its environment. But though Berkeley was certainly not aware of this difficulty in the days of the *Commonplace Book*, it is clear from *Alciphron* that he appreciated it later. This may well have been one of the reasons why he abandoned the project of writing a mathematical science of ethics.

But probably another reason weighed with Berkeley. If ethics be a science demonstrable in the same way as mathematics, why has God allowed so much diversity of opinion with regard to its definitions and propositions? There is universal agreement that $2 + 2 = 4$. This agreement Berkeley attributes to God: God brings it about, arbitrarily but not capriciously, that all men should agree that $2 + 2 = 4$. But there is no similar agreement with regard to such a proposition as 'Polygamy is wrong.' Now why could not God have secured that all men should agree on moral matters? Locke, indeed, had suggested that God had laid down in the Gospels "so perfect a body of Ethics that reason may be excused from the enquiry."[1] But Berkeley saw that the ethical ideas of the Gospels were accepted by a portion only, and as he feared, by a diminishing portion, of mankind. If God had intended ethics to be as demonstrable a science as mathematics, he would have arranged that the definitions of ethics should be recognized by all men to be as eternal and immutable as those of mathematics. But God has not done this, therefore it cannot be his will that there should be a demonstrable science of ethics.

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[1] *Commonplace Book*, I, p. 51.

In Berkeley's works subsequent to the *Principles* no mention is made of a possible mathematical science of ethics. The writings of his middle and later periods, in so far as they are concerned with ethics, are largely controversial. Perhaps the most systematic account of his views is to be found in the *Discourse on Passive Obedience*, where he makes "some enquiry into the origin, nature and obligation of moral duties in general, and the criterions by which they may be known."[2] He takes it for granted that there are moral rules or laws of nature, which carry with them an eternal obligation. He holds that these natural principles of morality have three characteristics:—

(i) Natural principles of morality are also rational. In saying that moral rules are natural laws we interpret nature in the highest sense. The best moral principles are those which may be rationally deduced by the maturest reason. These natural-rational principles "grow from the most excellent and peculiar part of human nature."[3] They are laws of nature, but they are also eternal rules of reason, because they necessarily result from the nature of things and may be demonstrated by the infallible deductions of reason.[4]

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[1] Letter to Molyneux, March 30, 1696.

[2] II, p. 104.

[3] *Alciphron*, II, p. 61.

[4] *Passive Obedience*, IV, p. 108.

(ii) Natural-rational principles are also divine. This follows from the whole course of Berkeley's philosophy. Nature consists of divine symbols, and its general laws are simply the arbitrary but not capricious volitions of God. "Nature is nothing but a series of free actions, produced by the best and wisest agent."[1]

(iii) Nature with its laws constitutes a system. "The Law of Nature is a system of such laws and precepts as that if they be all of them at all times in all places and by all men observed, they will necessarily promote the well-being of mankind."[2] Now moral rules are natural laws, and all the characteristics of natural laws belong to moral laws. Hence the same order and regularity which we perceive in the natural world exists also in the moral realm. But the moral and natural spheres are only partly coincident. The moral realm is necessarily natural, but the natural world is not necessarily moral. Vegetable existence possesses all the attributes of the natural, but we cannot predicate morality of it. But the moral world, as we find it existing among self-conscious beings, is a realm of ends, in which man living according to nature considers himself not as an isolated and independent individual, but as "a part of a whole, to the common good of which he ought to conspire."[3]

Tendency to promote or thwart happiness is the criterion of good and evil. It is a natural principle that we consider things in the light of happiness. Good is that which augments happiness, and evil that which impairs it. The *summum bonum* consists in happiness, and duty lies in the effort to attain the good and avoid the evil. It is the will of God that men should seek, not private pleasure merely, but the happiness of mankind as a whole. Berkeley draws a sharp distinction between pleasures of sense and pleasures of reason, but his view of the relative value of these undergoes a marked change between his earlier and his middle period. In the *Commonplace Book* (1705–1708), he does not recognize pleasures of reason at all. "Sensual

[1] *Op. cit.*, IV, p. 110.

[2] *Ibid.*, IV, p. 111.

[3] *Alciphron*, II, p. 67.

pleasure is the summum bonum."[1] In the Essays in the *Guardian* (1713), pleasures of reason and pleasures of sense are placed on the same level, so long as they are natural and not 'fantastical.' But in *Alciphron* (1732), pleasures of sense are degraded. The view that these constitute the *summum bonum* is strongly attacked. Sense-pleasure is natural only to brutes. Reason is the highest and most characteristic element in human nature, and rational pleasures are natural to man. It is interesting to note in Berkeley's theory of knowledge a similar growing recognition of the importance of reason.

For Berkeley, as for all other British moralists, the problem of the relation of egoism and altruism is urgent. But in Berkeley's ethical, as in his metaphysical philosophy, God solves many difficulties. This problem, among many others, would remain unresolved apart from God. Self-love remains the supreme principle in morality, but it is only at a low stage of moral development that self-love bids a man seek his own happiness only. Rational self-love seeks to regard the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. Self-love advocates only those kinds of actions that are supposed to be in accordance with the will of God. No purely selfish action can be conformable to the will of God. The Hobbist position of undiluted egoism is stated by Berkeley, but only to be refuted by the same arguments as Butler used.

The *summum bonum* cannot be mere temporal happiness. It cannot be confined within the conditions of time. It consists in eternal happiness. Now eternal happiness can be guaranteed only by God. Hence self-love lays down the rule that we act always in conformity with the will of God. The existence of God is required by morality as it is by knowledge. Berkeley's general metaphysical position implies that apart from the existence of God to guarantee the regularity and invariability of our sense-impressions knowledge would be impossible. And so in ethics the supreme moral end would be impossible apart from God. But it is worth noting that Berkeley does not, as Kant does, attempt to base a practical proof of God's existence on his indispensability for morality.

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[1] *Commonplace Book*, I, p. 47.

The resemblance both in general and in detail between this theory and that of the other philosopher-bishop of the time is close and striking. Butler's moral philosophy is more systematically developed than Berkeley's; but almost every feature which has contributed to make Butler's work the greatest product of British ethical thought is present in Berkeley's scattered remarks. For Berkeley, as for Butler, reason is ultimately the basis of moral obligation, and the general happiness the *summum bonum*. For both, moral rules are also laws of nature, and action in accordance with nature leads to the attainment of the moral end. They take precisely the same view of nature, as a divinely organized system of ends. Both emphasize, in language strangely similar, the moral importance of the disposition to social life existing in mankind; and both are animated by the same principles of practical social idealism. Only in their view of the interrelation of the 'principles of human nature' do they diverge. Or, it would be truer to say that while Butler's chief originality lies in his moral psychology, Berkeley has almost entirely omitted to make any psychological analysis. But all in all, the similarities are so notable as to suggest the possibility that one was directly influenced by the other. But such a suspicion is really gratuitous. It is indeed just possible, so far as the dates of publication of their works are concerned, that each was indebted to the other. Butler's *Sermons* were first published in 1726. Berkeley's *Passive Obedience* appeared in 1712, and *Alciphron* in 1732. But there is no internal evidence whatever that *Passive Obedience* influenced the *Sermons*, or the *Sermons*, *Alciphron*. The resemblance may be quite sufficiently accounted for by the antipathy to Hobbes felt by both thinkers, and the similarity of the attitude adopted by them towards the tendencies of ethical thought represented on the one hand by the so-called Cambridge Platonists, and on the other hand by such men of the world as Mandeville and Shaftesbury. To Hobbism both Berkeley and Butler were fundamentally opposed, though Berkeley at least was influenced by the Hobbist doctrine that moral rules are natural laws. From the Cambridge Platonists both learned something—the immutability of moral principles and the rational ground of moral obligation. Both regarded Mandeville's dicta as subversive of all morality. Towards Shaftesbury alone their attitudes diverged somewhat. Butler was more willing than Berkeley to admit that there was something in what Shaftesbury had to say. It is a serious misreading of Butler to class him, as many historians do, with the moral sense school; but at the same time, he is far more ready than Berkeley to learn from Shaftesbury. Berkeley's attitude to Shaftesbury, as we see it in *Alciphron*, is that of a man whose prejudices make him incapable of appreciating whatever truth may exist in the opinions of another with whom he does not see eye to eye.

When we consider the originality of Berkeley's metaphysics, it may seem strange that his writings on ethics make so small a contribution to that branch of philosophy. But it must be remembered that we have only fragments of Berkeley's thought on the problems of morality. What would we think of his metaphysics, if the *Principles* and the *Three Dialogues* had been lost? It may be argued that if Berkeley's ethical treatise had been preserved, it might have paved the way for as great an advance in ethics as his systematic works do in metaphysics. One thing at least may be said with certainty. It is clear from the scattered remarks which we do possess that Berkeley's ethical works would have shown the same two characteristics that assured his success in his metaphysical ventures. As Mr. Balfour has pointed out, two qualities are essential for the philosopher who is going to carry forward his science. He must have philosophical aptitude, and be mentally capable of speculation on the ultimate problems of life and knowledge. But in addition, he must possess the peculiar gift of being able to locate the exact point at which the next philosophical movement may best be made. It was for want of this special acumen that Clarke and Malebranche, in spite of their philosophical ability, were left in a philosophical backwater. But Berkeley had the faculty of noticing just where the next advance could be made. Hence his position in the main current of English philosophy.

It is clear that he did not at first perceive the point at which the next forward step in ethics could be taken. The reason for this was that the main line of ethical thought did not pass through Locke. Berkeley's intuition was not at fault in believing that the main metaphysical advance lay through Locke; and he was enabled to do his own good work by putting his finger unerringly on the spot from which that advance might best begin. His initial mistake in ethics lay in thinking that progress might be made in that branch of philosophy also by observing and correcting Locke's suggestions towards a mathematical treatment of ethics. But Berkeley soon perceived that the path marked out by Locke led into a *cul-de-sac;* and he therefore abandoned the attempt to construct a mathematical system of ethics. In his later ethical work he makes suggestions which do place him right in the center of the line of ethical advance in England. That line led through Hume to Utilitarianism. Berkeley believes, as we have seen, that the *summum bonum* is not private pleasure but the happiness and general good of all. And he draws a sharp distinction between different kinds of pleasure. So far as we can tell from Berkeley's scattered remarks, he did not appreciate the problems which Utilitarianism has to face. As it is, it is an anachronism to call him, as Professor Campbell Fraser does, a theological Utilitarian. But he was moving in that direction, and if he had given to the question the thought necessary to produce a systematic work, he might have been the first Utilitarian.

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